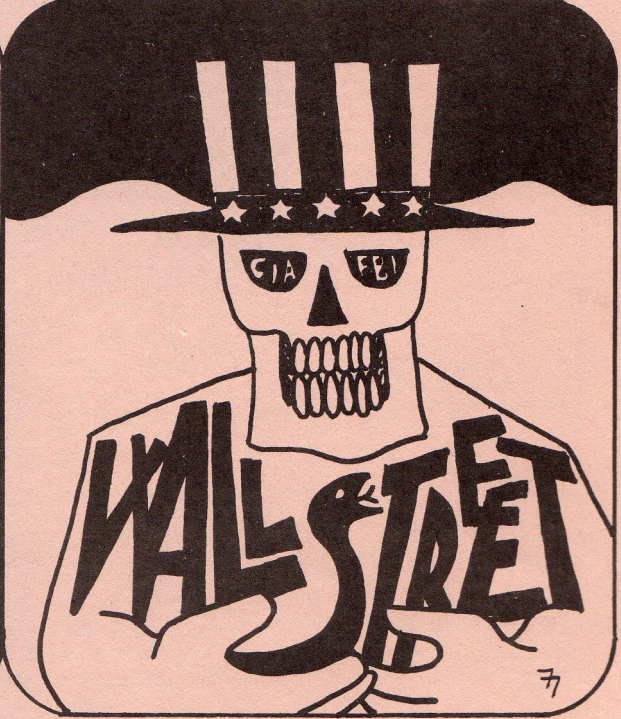
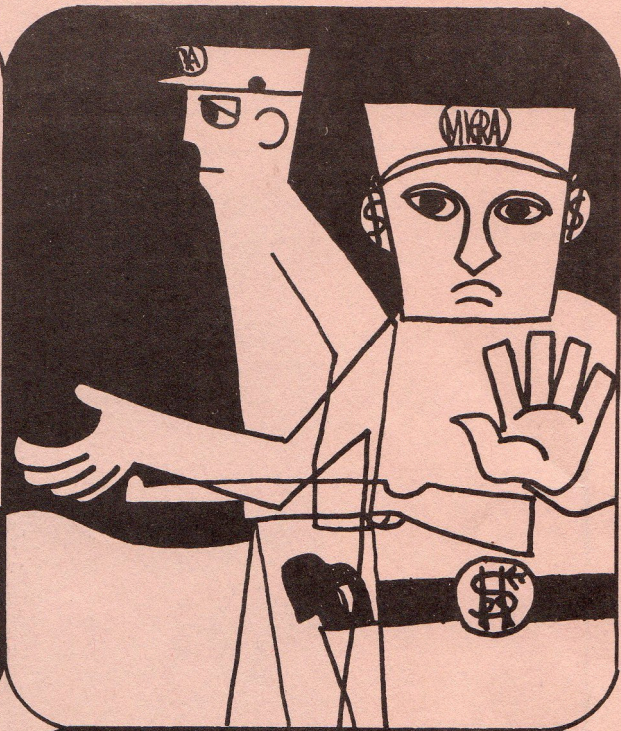


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MEXICAN AMERICAN  
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# UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS: ARE THEY THE PROBLEM?

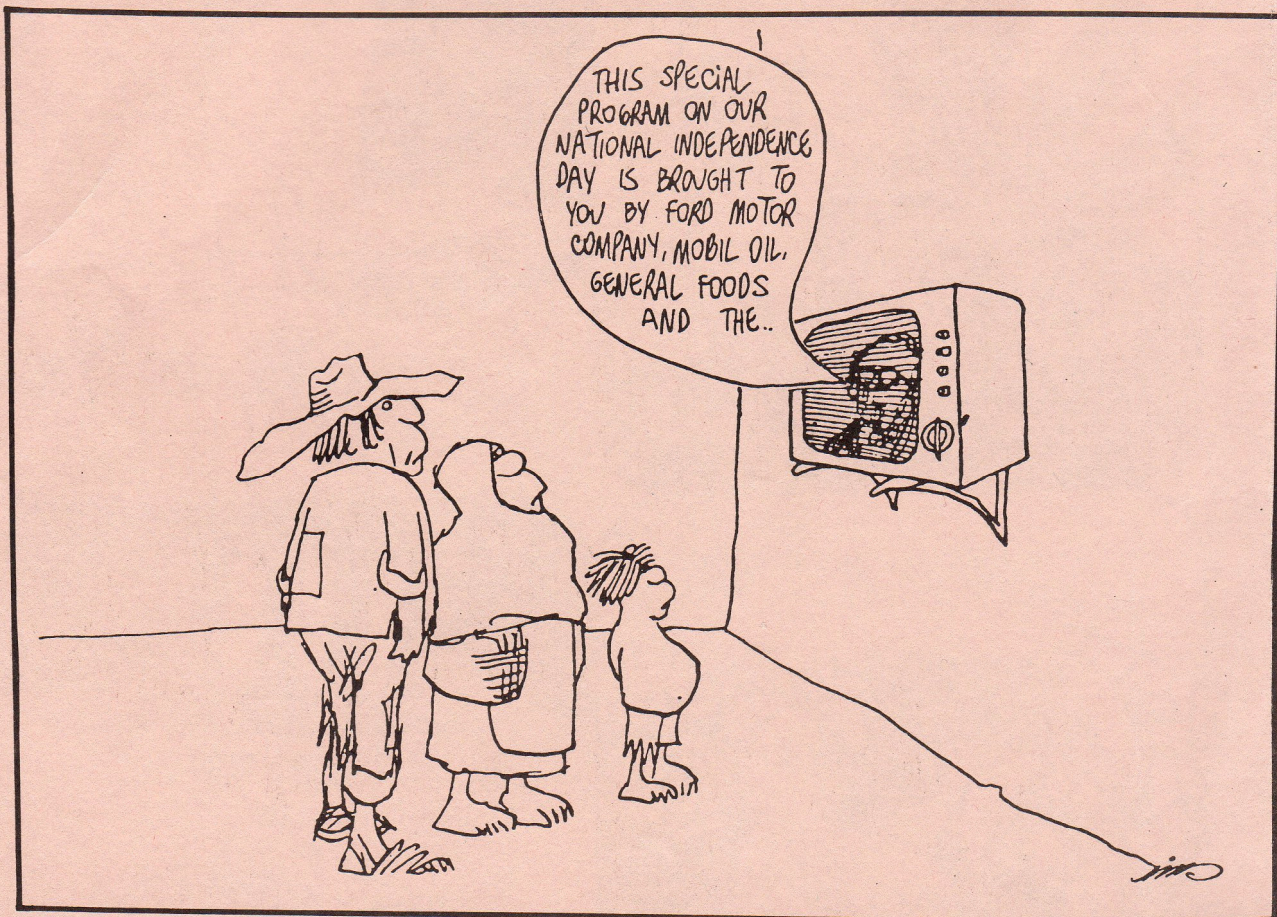
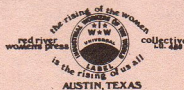


glenn scott · New American Movement Pamphlet



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## UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS:

### ARE THEY THE PROBLEM?

"I believe aliens to be holding down jobs that could be held by native-born Americans, therefore I endorse a strenuous effort to curtail both legal and illegal entries and to expel undesirable aliens."

"...to improve the welfare of wage earners in the U.S., it is our duty to remove the menace of unfair competition which exists in the vast number of aliens who have violated our immigration laws."

These quotes sound as though they might be from the AFL-CIO leadership, or Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall or one of the many national columnists who have been railing about the "illegal alien problem" over the past year. Actually, these are statements by President Hoover and the director of INS, Mr. Doak, in 1931.

This "problem", then is not a new one, nor is it always recognized as "a problem".\* A closer look at U.S. history over the last 60 years reveals that during times of relative prosperity, U.S. business (especially, but not exclusively agribusiness), under the banner of "labor shortage", has eagerly recruited Mexican immigrants as a source of cheap labor. During hard times, the "illegal aliens" are almost without fail discovered as the cause of many of our nation's ills - from taking OUR jobs, to spreading diseases. Regardless of the economic climate, the majority of Mexican immigrants over the last 50 years have lived and worked in this country under illegal or temporary (non-citizenship) status, with none of the rights of citizenship accorded the millions of white-skinned immigrants who have come to this country.

With the growing media hysteria on the "illegal alien problem", the submission of the Carter Plan on Immigration to Congress, and intensifying harassment of Chicano and Latino communities all over the country by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS or La Migra), it is imperative that people in the U.S. get a much fuller understanding of what are and are not the problems with the immigrant worker and our economy. Only then can we respond to our media, government officials, and policy-makers with a re-definition of the "illegal alien problem" and develop a common plan of action around our problems as we see them.

### HISTORY

In the 1920's restrictions on the immigration of Asians and Eastern Europeans were introduced, but Mexicans and other Latins were not included. Not so much, as University of Texas Sociologist Gilberto Cardenas points out because the U.S. considered the Mexican our friend, but because the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Agricultural interests lobbied heavily for keeping the "back door" open for the flow of cheap labor that it provided. The vast majority of this immigration from Mexico was under temporary status,

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\* According to INS statistics, an estimated 80% of "illegal" immigrants are Mexican and over 89% of deportations in 1975 were of Mexican people. The "illegal alien problem", then is largely a Mexican alien problem. Thus, the racist nature of how the "problem" is defined becomes more evident.



giving the Mexicans no rights of citizenship accorded to earlier European immigrant workers.

With the onslaught of the Great Depression and massive unemployment, government agencies (particularly INS) and several government spokespeople, including President Hoover, began zeroing in on the "illegal entry" as the cause of the high rate of unemployment. Massive redadas or raids of Mexican communities began. An estimated 1/5 of the people of Mexican descent were deported. After protest made this repression politically embarrassing, deportations slacked off in 1933, but, not so strangely, the Great Depression continued. In fact, Growers in Texas in 1936-37 began screaming "labor shortage" and put pressure on the state relief agency for more laborers to harvest their crops. The state relief



graphic by Domingo Ulloa

director replied within hours, calling for offices around the state to cut their rolls of all able-bodied workers (over 50% were Black and Mexican) to get them out to the fields. With Texas and the rest of the nation still registering 20% unemployment and better, it is clear that the problem was not a shortage of labor, but a shortage of cheap labor - people desperate enough to work for the Growers' starvation wages.

When many of the men and some of the women joined the service during World War II, better paying jobs opened up for those who had been occupying the bottom of the wage scale - women, Blacks, Mexicans, and other minorities. Less competition at the bottom, loosened the pressure that had kept wages down, and Agribusiness once again began demanding a greater, more reliable (that is, exploitable) source of cheap labor. In 1942 the Bracero Program was instituted, bringing Mexicanos into the Southwest for agricultural labor, but once again with temporary status (that is, no rights of citizenship). Rationalized as a war-time necessity, the Bracero Program, nonetheless, lasted 22 years.

In 1954 the INS instituted Operation Wetback in response to the threat of economic recession following the Korean war and in keeping with the general climate of political repression of the McCarthy era. One and a half million people of Mexican descent were rounded up and deported. This was estimated to have been 1/7th of the Mexican population in the U.S..

Mechanization of agriculture rapidly increased in the 60's, largely



in response to growing unionization efforts among farmworkers. Thus, the labor that had produced the capital that made mechanization possible, was no longer needed in great numbers. In 1964 an immigration quota was passed by Congress limiting Mexican legal immigration to about 70,000 per year. But the demand for cheap labor did not disappear. Growers continued to actively recruit cheap labor to break union efforts. In 1966-67, a strike by farmworkers in the Rio Grande Valley was broken by recruiting Mexicanos from across the border. (Brutal repression by the Texas Rangers, also had a lot to do with it.) In the urban areas, the growing fast food industry, garment factories, and the motel-tourist business all sought cheap labor to avoid higher wage demands or union efforts by employees.

With the legal door virtually shut, yet the demand for cheap labor still apparent, the only door open to Mexicans who desperately needed work was the one marked 'illegal'.

And so the "illegal aliens" - the workers without papers - have come to this country, on their own or ushered in by the vast underground networks of smugglers (coyotes), who connect with everybody from union busting Growers in California to resaurant and construction chains from Tuscon to Seattle, L.A. to New York.

The Recession of 1974, the continued stagnation of the economy, high unemployment and inflation, has laid the basis for the latest re-discovery of the 'illegal alien' as the problem.

#### WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS HISTORY?

First, U.S. businesses and corporations have used and are still using immigrant workers (primarily Mexicanos) to keep wages and workers down in what is known as the secondary labor market, or the low-waged non-unionized workforce. The fact that these workers have not been granted citizenship rights accorded other workers in this country, makes them even more vulnerable to exploitation than other workers. As illegals they are sitting ducks for the Border Patrol dragnets and redadas in Mexicano/Chicano workplaces and neighborhoods. They are less likely to attempt unionization; less likely to complain of bad checks from employers, underpayment, forced kickbacks. Their illegal status denies them access to health, welfare or social services in case of firing, sickness, injury or victimization (rape, burglary, thievery, extortion, assault, etc)

It is no surprise that illegals were escorted by state police onto Grower property in California during UFW strikes. It is no surprise that President Carter allowed 800 undocumented workers to enter the fields of Presidio, Texas this summer to harvest a Grower's onion crop - at below minimum wage. It is also no surprise that Agribusiness interests are lobbying in Texas and at the national level for an amendment to Carter's Immigration Plan exempting agricultural and domestic labor from immigration policies. Business and corporations in a capitalist society will continue to use legal or illegal means to get cheap labor - both to keep profits up and to keep workers from organizing.

A second factor in this history is racism. Racial divisions in the U.S. workforce - whites on the upper end of the wage scale and a majority of Blacks, Mexicanos, and other minorities on the bottom - have historically made it possible to exploit minorities to a greater degree (they get the heaviest, dirtiest, most dangerous work for the worst pay) and to keep both white and minorities down. When you think your worst enemy is a Black or Mexican worker, then the boss (and the system that gives the boss all the shortcuts) gets off clean.

Also, this racism is not just out there, but in the heads of many white people. These attitudes are partly responsible for the scapegoating of minorities for the problems of our society - unemployment, crime, competition for jobs, etc. After World War I the American Federation of Labor, rather than focus on their past actions refusing admittance to Blacks or on the racial divisions in the workforce, turned on Blacks as the main obstacle to unionizing efforts. Today, many in the AFL-CIO leadership see the competition from the undocumented workers as the MAIN obstacle to lowering unemployment and increasing wages.



A third factor is the growth of the INS as a para-military force directed against one people - the Chicano/Mexicano/Latino population in the U.S. Similar to other military forces, La Migra is secretive, making authentic documentation of their activities difficult to obtain. The leadership is largely military trained, with two commissioners and the former INS chief being generals. La Migra also uses advanced military equipment, developed for use against the Vietnamese people. Dragnets and raids are frequently coordinated with other undercover and military forces. Operation Wetback in 1954 was a coordinated effort by the INS, the U.S. Navy, FBI, local police, state police.

## U.S. ROLE IN MEXICO

An area not examined in the brief history of U.S. immigration policy, but one that is crucial for understanding the structure of immigration and its effects on our economy, is Mexico.

There is no doubt that Mexican illegal immigration, as it is defined, has been increasing rapidly in the last few years. Deportations, which are estimated by INS to be roughly 1/3 of immigration, have increased rapidly. In 1966, La Migra deported 134,000 people and in 1976 deported 794,000 - over a 500% increase. We don't have to wait for a meeting of Carter's Council of Economic Advisors to learn the cause of the increase, either. The recession we have suffered in the U.S. has hit economies - such as Mexico - that are dependent on ours much worse.

There is now 40-50% unemployment and underemployment in Mexico City. There are also long term characteristics of U.S. foreign relations that sew up the dependency on the U.S. of "developing nations" like Mexico (see Samir Amin's article in Monthly Review, v.29 #3 and Philip Russell's new book Mexico in Transition (Colorado River Press, Austin). U.S. investment in Mexico and other underdeveloped countries has been geared to: 1) establishing a favorable climate for U.S. multi-national corporations, resulting in capital-intensive rather than labor(job) intensive industry; 2) propping up a privileged minority to buy 'stability' for U.S. investment, which develops production of luxury goods for a middle class as opposed to mass consumption goods for the majority; and 3) blocking the development of self-reliant industry and agriculture. For increasing numbers of the poor and working population in Mexico the only alternative to hopeless poverty (aside from rebellion) is to risk the dehumanization, possible imprisonment or deportation which will face them as an "illegal" worker in the U.S.\*

This imperialist foreign policy by the U.S. must be seen for what it is and for how it is intimately linked to the U.S.-Mexico immigration situation.

## EFFECTS OF IMMIGRATION ON THE U.S. WORKFORCE

Increased immigration from Mexico is having an impact on the U.S. workforce, but not in the way media and union officials and others have often claimed. A study done for the U.S. Labor Department in 1975 stated that the average wage for undocumented workers was \$2.71, and that 61% of people of Mexican descent in the Southwest (where the majority of undocumented people live and work) average a wage of \$1.71. The vast majority of undocumented workers work at or below minimum wage, at jobs that most Americans (mostly white) would not take because of hard, physical labor, long hours, and dirty dangerous work. In the film "The Unwanted", a restaurant owner argues quite seriously that he has never found better workers than "illegals". "You can't get Americans to wash dishes anymore. They just think they are too good." Aside from the enraging fact that the owner has probably never had to wash dishes for \$1.50 an hour with no hope of advancement, there is definitely something else going on.

\*It is no secret among U.S. policymakers that the undocumented workers is one of the few escape valves that Mexico presently has to stave off a major social upheaval.







American citizens at the bottom of the wage scale are demanding higher wages for the shit jobs they do, or else they are flat refusing to do that kind of crushing work and are opting for welfare. In response to this employers are seeking cheaper labor through hiring undocumented people. Since the majority of people in the low wage market are minority people, the competition that is going on between those Americans that are demanding higher wages for jobs and undocumented workers that are desperate enough to work for less is driving a wedge - not between most white workers and the undocumented - but between low paid Black, Chicano and other minority workers and the undocumented. In the Southwest it is pitting Chicano against Mexicano. Antonio Orendain, leader of the independent Texas Farmworkers Union, who has for years been trying to organize farmworkers on both sides of the Rio Grande, describes the situation as: "If I am hungrier than you, then I get to work for less."

#### SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The problem, then is not the "illegal alien", but the situation where people are forced to work for less. Now there are better ways and worse ways to deal with this Work for Less Problem. The AFL-CIO says that if we can eliminate or at least limit the number of undocumented workers, we can remove this competition at the **bottom**, unemployment will be alleviated and wages will rise. A lot of liberals, including some Blacks and some Chicanos are sympathetic to this position.

But beware! The consequences of such a solution are dangerous, racist, and fail to deal directly with the problem. For one thing, it will continue and intensify the formation of a mini-police state against Chicano and Mexicano people in the U.S. That's right. Citizen and non-citizen. It is estimated that for every undocumented person caught by INS, there have been 7 to 10 people of brown skin harrassed.

For another thing, a solution of getting rid of undocumented people will not necessarily bring an end to the central problem of working for less. Corporations will still demand cheap labor, and unless their "right" to get it is directly attacked, it will be the same story again only with a different set of people. Smuggling of human labor from Mexico, the Caribbean, the Middle East and so on would continue, similar to the days of Prohibition. And if a stable supply could not be obtained in that manner, then eyes would turn toward the millions of underpaid, underemployed, unemployed and welfare recipients in this country. Right now, Carter is instituting programs in several major cities, forcing people off welfare and back to work for a menial wage of \$2 an hour. If we jump in now and lay the blame on the undocumented workers, how will we avoid blaming poor Black, Chicano, and other minority workers for keeping wages down?

The solution, then is not to eliminate the most exploited sector of the workforce in hopes that things will get a little better for the rest of us. It may get a little better for a few for awhile, but somebody else will have to fill in the last row. The solution is to find ways to join hands with the people currently on the last row against the "right" of businesses and corporations to divide us up and pay some of us more and some of us a lot less. Before discussing more how this could be done, an explanation of the Carter Plan and how it doesn't solve the problem will be given.

#### THE CARTER PLAN

Following on the heels of the recent re-discovery of the "illegal alien problem", President Carter finally announced his long-heralded immigration plan in late July. Congress will probably vote on the plan and whatever amendments are submitted in late spring. The plan, at this point has five major components:



- 1) amnesty (citizenship) for all those who can prove continuous residency before Jan 1, 1970 (including the right to bring immediate family to this country, right to all social services accorded other citizens)
- 2) Five year work permits for those who can prove residency between Jan 1, 1970 and Jan 1, 1977 (no rights to welfare, social security or social services). After the 5 year period it is possible to apply for citizenship
- 3) civil fines for employers who can be proven to have hired undocumented workers (\$1000 per worker) and court action against those who "engage in a pattern or practice of hiring undocumented workers."
- 4) undocumented workers arriving after Jan 1, 1977 shall be deported if caught
- 5) an increase in the Border Patrol by at least 2,000.



#### PROBLEMS WITH THE CARTER PLAN

Some people have said that the good thing about the Carter Plan is what it doesn't call for. Thank goodness, they say, it doesn't call for immediate mass deportations of all undocumented workers in this country. Thank goodness, they say, it doesn't call for an electrified fence from Brownsville to Tijuana with a 50 foot mine belt on either side.

Thank goodness? When the cops bust into your house on a misinformed tip and without a warrant, break your furniture beat up your son, terrorize your daughter, would you say, "Well, thank goodness they didn't burn my house down.?" We don't stop injustice by being grateful for not having to deal with a greater injustice. We stop injustice by stopping injustice.

So with the Carter Plan. The plan offers amnesty to an estimated 3% of undocumented workers in this country; re-establishes a Bracero (brown skin) worker in this country with limited legal rights; and continues to label Mexican immigration after Jan 1, 1977 "illegal", meaning no rights and deportation if detected; and offers increased Migra harrassment and surveillance of Mexicano, Chicano and other Latino peoples in the U.S.

Most of all, the plan IN NO WAY directly confronts the three key aspects that have created the increased flow of immigration: 1) the right of employers in the low wage market to hire workers for less, 2) the U.S. role in the maintenance of poverty for the great majority of people in Mexico, and 3) the consistent pattern of discrimination against minority workers in the U.S. workforce.

In fact, the Carter Plan maintains all the divisions we already have and even adds on a few more. One of the more insidious aspects to the Carter Plan is it's strategic thrust toward dividing the exploited immigrants against themselves. Carter seems to be bent on winning the General Patton award for divide and conquer tactics. In response to demands for amnesty for all and the right to social services accorded



citizen workers, Carter has divided undocumented immigrants into three categories. To the smallest minority (the 3% here before Jan 1, 1970) go the spoils (amnesty). To the less fortunate majority (those here between Jan 1, 1970 and Jan 1, 1977) go the scraps (five year work permits). To the lowest of the low (the majority to be who come from Jan 1, 1977 and beyond), goes the boot.

Now, this is not a new idea. Carter, and whoever helps him spin these tales of woe, used the same scheme with the Vietnam Amnesty Plan, when he bestowed amnesty on the largely white, college-educated draft dodgers, but maintained punishment for the largely minority and poor white deserters.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE?

A common program of action must be developed out of an understanding of the three key aspects structuring immigration and its effects on the U.S. economy: 1) the "right" to work for less, 2) the consistent pattern of discrimination against minority workers, and 3) U.S. role in the maintenance of poverty in Mexico.

To directly confront the right to work for less, we as rank and file members of unions and as supporters of the labor movement, must pressure unions and the AFL-CIO to put top priority on measures that will strengthen the worker and her/his ability to organize for better wages and working conditions. This would mean:

- 1) much more energetic campaigns to organize the unorganized
- 2) demand stricter enforcement of minimum wage laws and minimum wage increases with inflation. (Carter's Plan calls for a staff increase of 265 for minimum wage enforcement. If the several thousand staff of INS had as their top priority enforcement of minimum wage, the entire dynamics of the situation would be changed.)
- 3) a vigorous campaign for Repeal of Right to Work laws
- 4) labor law reforms which would speed up the NLRB process and bring farmworkers nationally under the NLRB, with special provisions enabling them to organize unions
- 5) The AFL-CIO proposals for penalizing employers for hiring the undocumented and for increased enforcement by INS must be sharply criticized. Penalties on employers for hiring (instead of penalties for paying less) could discourage employers from hiring people with brown skin - those employers law-abiding enough to fear a penalty. Unscrupulous employers will ignore the threat of a penalty and continue to exploit people for less pay. A bigger INS means a bigger police state against brown-skinned people in the U.S.

The AFL-CIO has had 20 years to get tough with labor law reform, with repeal of Right to Work Laws, with bringing farmworkers under the NLRB and with organizing the unorganized. It's record in these areas is full of weakness and compromise and racist attitudes. Only now, when the economy moves into a long downturn, with government and banks screaming for workers to accept cutbacks and austerity, with the Mexican economy in a crisis which gives some 20% of its population no choice but to attempt illegal immigration, does the AFL-CIO look at its dwindling base in the workforce (membership has declined steadily since 1947) and says that our problems will be solved if we can stop those immigrants from Mexico. Not only is this response racist, but it will create more problems than it will solve.

Many of the measures called for above also deal directly with racial discrimination in the workforce, since the low-paid workforce is largely minority workers (and women of all races). But other measures should be added:

- 1) Affirmative action in unions and in employment and universities
- 2) More emphasis by unions on training bilingual organizers and developing bilingual materials.



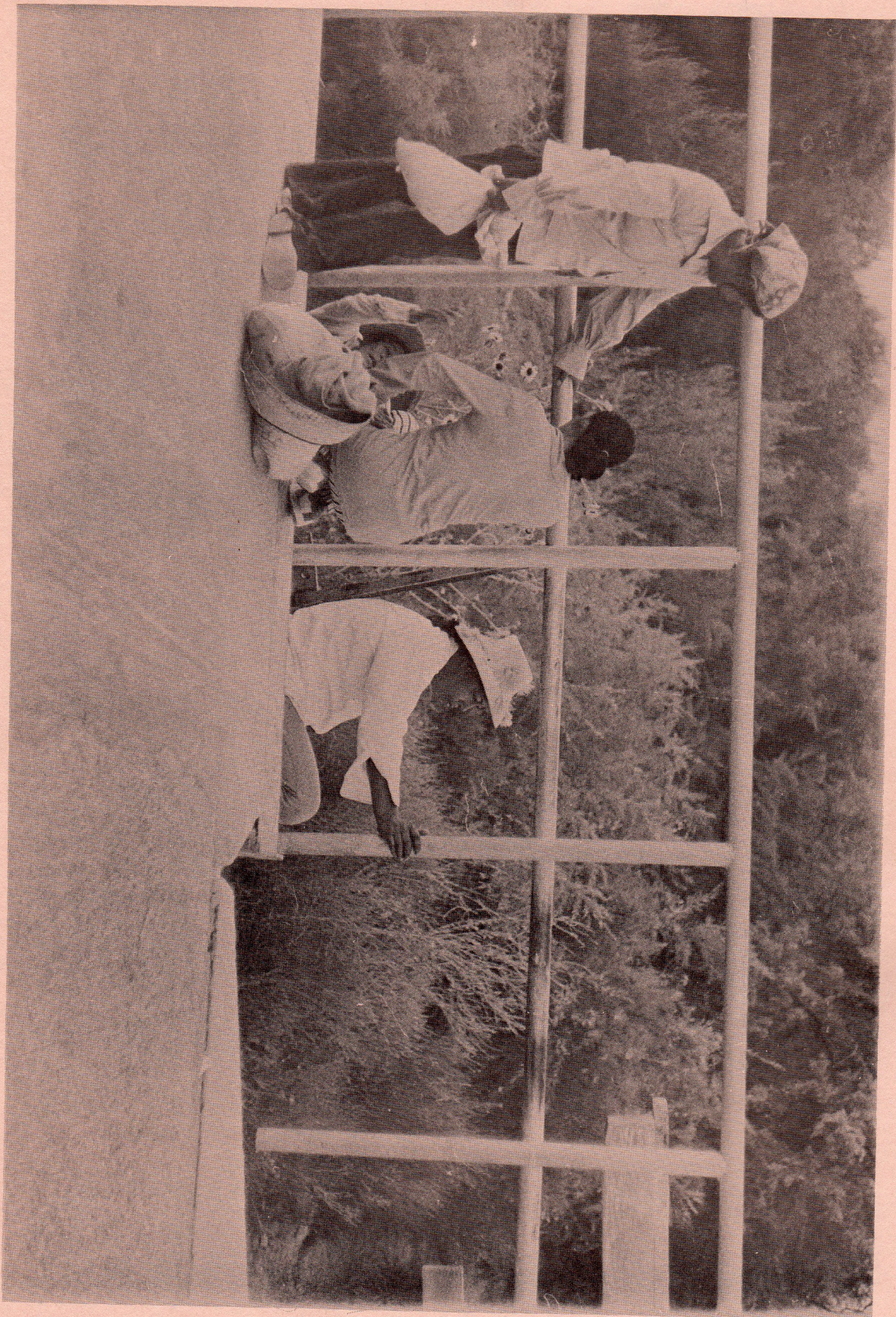


To combat the racist aspects of Carter's plan, the AFL-CIO proposals and others, demands must be made for:

- 1) General amnesty - meaning the rights of citizen workers must be extended to all immigrant workers. Workers, particularly minority workers who are already stepped on the most, should not have the additional handicap of being illegal. If they do not warrant the same rights, as other citizens who work and live in this country, then they should not have to pay taxes.
- 2) Counteract the often racist propaganda that immigrant workers take advantage of our social services in the U.S., preventing needy U.S. citizens from access. A recent study in California has shown that only a tiny minority of undocumented workers use welfare, social services or foodstamps, because they fear detection. Yet almost all those with jobs, except those with unscrupulous employers, were paying taxes.
- 3) oppose any increase in INS funding. The cost of maintaining the INS already costs working people many times more the most generous estimate of the "drain" undocumented workers make on social services (services they have worked for and have a right to).
- 4) develop better channels of information and support with Chicano/Mexicano communities in order to expose the harassment by INS in these areas. In part because of public exposure and organized protest, city officials of Moline, Illinois had to publicly apologize on Friday, Sept. 9, 1977 to the Spanish community, as well as pay \$2,000 in damages for "a series of improper raids in an attempt to find illegal aliens." A small but significant victory.
- 5) Working in unions and in supporting union efforts, call for organizing undocumented persons into the union. An SEIU local in Boston recently denounced an INS raid made on a hospital where they were having a union drive. They saw it for what it was - a union busting tactic. Because of their public criticisms and defense of workers at deportation hearings, the union was able to win over many more minority workers - legal and illegal.
- 6) STOP USING THE TERM ILLEGAL ALIEN. They are workers like you and I.

Glenn Scott, member of  
New American Movement and  
coordinator of NAM's National  
Racism Commission





-Farmer women crossing the border at Ojinaga, Mexico to find work in the melon harvests near Presidio, Texas. Their illegal status is ignored by both U.S. and Mexican authorities because of grower demand for cheap labor.

photo by Maria Flores

July, 1975